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Is American culture a sustainability problem?
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Ever since the industrial revolution, American culture has been one that involves fast paced innovation and increasing reliance on technology. It is because of this that we have progressed so much in such a short time compared to other, longer established countries such as those in Europe. We are now leaders of the world politically, economically, as well as in the military. Unfortunately, in order to move at such a quick pace, our federal government has put our nation in a large amount of debt. Starting with the great depression, people have become much more frugal with money, buying what's cheapest in order to be able to survive. A major example is the types of foods we buy which generally are not local, organic food. Unfortunately, we have become accustomed to this standard of living in regards to inexpensive products and constantly upgrading technology. A large factor in technology is the production of cars. Americans are so used to driving cars that our cities, small and large, are planned around them. This is not only a sustainability problem for America but also a health problem. All forms of Americans are stakeholders in the sustainability problem that faces our nation.

In the Ted Talk, Addicted to Risk, Naomi Klein raises the biggest problem that our nation should be concerned with but is not – Our culture as Americans is willing to gamble with precious and irreplaceable resources in order to continue our standard of living. A majority of Americans are not buying into the changes that need to be made for several reasons. The first reason is that there is no real scientific certainty and no immediate evidence that prompts our society to make a change. We also have the expectancy that our technology will continue to progress in a way that will save us from the hole we have dug ourselves into. This gives us the impression that we have the option to wait until the last possible moment to finally take action. We also have the assumption that there is a limitless amount

of resources provided by the environment for us to take advantage of. When stakeholders like Sarah Palin claim “Drill baby drill” because God gave us these resources to use and when BP claimed that the amount of oil spilled into the ocean would never make a dent in its expansive mass, there is a sustainability problem of the American culture which centers around what’s easiest and what’s cheapest.

While Naomi Klein raises powerful points about how change needs to happen now rather than waiting till the last possible minute, this doesn’t state how it is so much an American culture problem as it is a problem of our national leaders. If our country is designed around the car, which it is, how are our city planners and government officials changing this for the greater good. While many Americans own and know how to use bikes, it is often implausible for them to actually carry out this routine. My parents both commute an hour to work. We live 5 minutes away from a grocery store yet there are no sidewalks or protected bike lanes on the way to get there. Other countries have provided full bicycle networks for their citizens as a way of promoting a more sustainable and healthy city. Additionally, it is not the citizens of America who have gotten us into this problem of an unsustainable life style, but it is all we can do to succumb in order to keep up and progress with our technology. It’s unfortunately not as easy of an option as Naomi says to just make the switch to greener decisions. Low income families who are barely able to feed their family can buy hamburgers from McDonalds for the price that would only purchase a head of broccoli. Americans often don’t have the option to live in a more sustainable way and the real problem falls on the regulators and the type of opportunities they can and will provide for us.

Ronald Reagan’s presidency was one which targeted the problems of the federal government as power that should be taken back into the hands of the citizen in order to make America into one of the world’s leading countries. In his candidacy for President Announcement, November 1979, Reagan states how the world does not expect much of us. They believe we should be preparing for a total loss in

resources and an upset in our standard of living, but the American culture is to persevere. Through Ronald Reagan's lifetime, he lived through four wars, and because of them our federal government created a large amount of debt for our nation that they only continue to add to. Because of this bad economy, corporations were doing whatever they could to make a profit which only deteriorated the value of the American dollar. Reagan states that the American culture is to fight and that includes this fight against climate change. There have not been enough incentive or rewards in changing our energy which has not prompted any real change. "Less is not enough" this will only prolong the amount of time before we actually run out. Americans today have "fought harder, paid a higher price for freedom and come more to advance the dignity of man than any people who have ever lived on this Earth" and it is our American culture that will help to reverse the problem of sustainability.

Reagan's inspiring speech about how America is one of the most advanced countries that is being brought down by the federal government and the decisions they make has several problems with it regarding the structure of democracy. It is understood that the President and congress men and women hold the decision making power in their hands but it is up to the citizens to hold them accountable. Politicians will do and say whatever they need to do in order to get elected, and voters continuously allow them to do this and get away with it. It has become the culture of our politics to be filled with lying and cheating in order to gain a position in office. If the people of America want a change then it is our responsibility to get involved and voice this and not just through rants on social media. The Americans are often made fun of for being lazy and obese for all of our fast food restaurants, but what are we doing to change our lifestyles into something we want? As Reagan points out the federal government isn't working to their full potential, but when not held accountable or forced to make changes, nothing will change.

Jeff Bussgang, author of *Entrepreneurship as America's Greatest Export*, points out that part of America's responsibility to the world is its entrepreneurship. It is this aspect that has helped to progress

the entire world. Entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Michael Dell are just a couple of Americans who have helped to shape the world. These ideas and the freedom of America to allow people to pursue what may be viewed as “impossible” is what is most respected coming out of our nation. It is because of the American culture that has allowed us to progress so much as a country and therefore become a global leader.

I do not believe that it is American culture that is the sustainability problem – we as a nation are working with what we are given. For example, many people do not have a choice but to drive everywhere. Our cities are built and designed to accommodate cars rather than the pedestrians and thus we are forced into this lifestyle. You can already see the rise in sustainable interest as more and more corporations begin to advertise their products of sustainability in attempts to appeal to society. This also shows what the real sustainability problem is in America – corporations and leaders of our nation claim they are going to make changes/ are making changes, yet they are not and are only greenwashing their promises. These stakeholders say what they need to in order to gain enough of the public’s trust and then continue to deteriorate the environment. Americans have become accustomed to a certain standard of living and will most likely not move backwards in technology in order to become more sustainable, but Americans are very interested in moving forward. If the sustainable strategies and technologies were provided, Americans would not object.

"Addicted to Risk." *Naomi Klein*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.

"Ronald Reagan - Candidacy Announcement." *Reagan 2020* -. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.

Bloomberg Business Week. Bloomberg, n.d. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.